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ABSTRACT

The report summarizes a survey of 600 Hispanic parents, each with one or more children in grades 1-12, designed to document parents' experiences with school programs for limited-English-proficient (LEP) students and to ascertain their attitudes about the programs' goals and practices. Parents drawn from five metropolitan areas with large Hispanic concentrations (Los Angeles, California; New York, New York; Miami, Florida; San Antonio, Texas; Houston, Texas) were interviewed. They ranked five educational goals in this descending order of importance: (1) learning to read, write, and speak English; (2) academic subjects (math, history, science); (3) read, write, and speak Spanish; (4) Hispanic culture; (5) extras such as music, arts, sports. Most, particularly parents with students at higher educational levels, also preferred that students be taught English as soon as possible, even before Spanish. A large majority felt their children should be taught academic courses in English. Survey results are presented in narrative form and also in graphs and tables. The survey form is included. (MSE)

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ED 405 726

The Importance of Learning English

A National Survey of Hispanic Parents

Commissioned by
Center for Equal Opportunity

Conducted by
Market Development Inc.

Analysis by
Diversified Research Inc.

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Introduction

by Linda Chavez
President, Center for Equal Opportunity

One of the biggest challenges schools now face is educating a large and growing population of children who cannot speak English. The Department of Education estimates that some 2.4 million children, nearly three-quarters of whom are Hispanic, have limited proficiency in English. For more than two decades, federal policy has encouraged programs to teach these children in their native language for some or most of their academic subjects. According to a recent study by the American Legislative Exchange Council, 60 percent of state and locally funded programs for students with limited English proficiency are bilingual education programs, which use the child's native language for at least part of the instruction.[1] Indeed, many prominent bilingual education advocates claim that learning to read first in the native tongue is necessary to develop optimal reading ability in the second language.[2] In practice, this often means that limited-English-proficient children will be kept in bilingual education programs for years. One recent study of New York City schools found that only about half of children who entered bilingual programs in kindergarten graduated into regular classes within three years, and only 22 percent of children who began such programs in second grade did so.[3]

Most methodologically sound studies of bilingual education, however, show that teaching a child in his or her native language is largely ineffective. The most comprehensive analysis of the academic literature on this subject, conducted by Christine Rossell and Keith Baker, shows that native language instruction is no better than, or actually worse than, doing nothing at all for limited-English-proficient children. In place of bilingual education, Rossell recommends, "all-English instruction holds the least risk and usually the greatest benefit for limited-English-proficient children."[4]

But beyond the debate over the efficacy of bilingual education is the question of what parents of limited-English-proficient children really want for their own children. This question has been largely ignored in the research on bilingual education. As a practical matter, this issue primarily concerns Hispanic parents, who make up the overwhelming majority of children in bilingual programs. To date, only two national surveys of parents of limited-English-proficient children have been undertaken: a study by the Educational Testing Service for the U.S. Department of Education in 1988; and an opinion poll of Hispanics on a variety of public policy topics, "The Latino National Political Survey," in 1992.[5] The former showed that the overwhelming majority of Hispanic parents—78 percent of Mexican Americans and 82 percent of Cubans—opposed teaching their children in Spanish if it

meant less time for teaching English. Although the Latino National Political Survey showed strong support for bilingual education, less than 10 percent of respondents thought that the purpose of bilingual education was to maintain Spanish language and culture.[6]

The Center for Equal Opportunity commissioned the following survey of Hispanic parents in an effort to discern what they want their children to learn in school. The survey was conducted by Market Development Inc., a California-based polling firm that specializes in the Hispanic market. Survey results were analyzed by Diversified Research Inc., a national survey research firm based in New York.

The Center for Equal Opportunity is a non-partisan research institution, which studies the issues of race, ethnicity, and assimilation. This survey is part of an ongoing project on bilingual education.

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[1] American Legislative Exchange Council Foundation and U.S. English, "Bilingual Education in the United States 1991-1992; Special Supplement; The Report Card on American Education," (Washington, D.C.: 1994)

[2] See Stephen Krashen and Douglas Biber, *On Course: Bilingual Education in California* (Sacramento: California Association for Bilingual Education, 1988); and Kenji Hakuta, *Mirror of Language: The Debate on Bilingualism* (New York: Basic Books, 1986).

[3] New York City Board of Education, "Educational Progress of Students in Bilingual and English as a Second Language Programs: A Longitudinal Study, 1990-1994."

[4] Christine H. Rossell and Keith Baker, *Bilingual Education in Massachusetts: The Emperor Has No Clothes*, (Boston: Pioneer Institute, 1996).

[5] Joan Baratz-Snowden, et al., "Parent Preference Study," (Princeton, N.J.: Educational Testing Service, 1988); Rudolfo O. de la Garza, et al., *Latino Voices: Mexican, Puerto Rican, and Cuban Perspectives on American Politics* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1992).

[6] Baratz-Snowden, 54; de la Garza, 99.

Executive Summary

by Michael LaVelle
President, Diversified Research Inc.

This analysis summarizes the results of a survey of Hispanic parents of school-age children, conducted by Market Development Inc., on behalf of the Center for Equal Opportunity, during July-August 1996. The purpose of the survey was to document the experience of Hispanic parents with school programs designed for children needing help with English, and to ascertain Hispanic parents' attitudes regarding the goals and practices of such programs. Because Hispanics account for the majority of the clientele of U.S. school programs for children needing help with English, the present study should be of more than academic interest. In fact, the results of the survey have clear and important implications from a social policy planning viewpoint.

Methodology

In all, 600 interviews were completed with Hispanic parents, each with one or more children currently in school (first grade through high school). Respondent selection occurred within five metropolitan areas in which Hispanics are relatively heavily concentrated, viz., Los Angeles, New York, Miami, San Antonio, and Houston. Questionnaires were administered via telephone, by professionally trained, bilingual interviewers calling from a central data collection facility located in San Diego, Calif. The results of a survey of 600 randomly selected respondents is statistically accurate to within plus or minus 4 percent at the 95 percent confidence level. This means that 95 times out of 100, the results will fall within a range of plus or minus 4 percentage points of the results one would obtain from interviewing the entire population from which the sample was drawn.

In addition to the substantive questions related to the goals and practices of school programs for children needing help with English, survey respondents were also asked a series of socio-demographic background questions. This allows the sample to be segmented for analysis purposes. For example, variations in responses can be systematically analyzed for patterns of similarity or difference based on age, gender, educational level, ethnicity, geographical region, length of time in the U.S., language spoken, etc.

Summary of Results

Respondents were read, in random order, a list of five educational goals and asked to rank them by indicating which they considered to be most important, which second most important, etc. The five educational goals, listed in order of importance, as ranked by Hispanic parents, are as follows:

	Percentage of Hispanic Parents Ranking Each Goal:	
	Most Important	**Second Most Important**
Learning to read, write, and speak English	51.0%	18.8%
Learning academic subjects like math, history, science	23.3%	30.7%
Learning to read, write, and speak Spanish	11.0%	25.5%
Learning about Hispanic culture	4.3%	8.5%
Learning extras like music, arts, and sports	3.7%	8.8%

As the table shows, the majority of Hispanic parents (51%) considered *learning to read, write, and speak English* to be most important among the five educational goals presented. Learning English was judged to be much more important than *learning other academic subjects, including math, history, and science* (23.3%). This, in and of itself, attests to the importance Hispanic parents place on learning English. Perhaps most telling, however, is the relative importance of learning English versus learning Spanish. Only 11 percent of all respondents designated *learning to read, write, and speak Spanish* as the most important goal, distantly followed by only 4.3 percent who think the top priority should be *learning about Hispanic culture.*

The greater priority placed on learning English versus learning Spanish occurred consistently across all major subgroupings of the sample population. All were more likely to rank learning English as a more important goal than learning Spanish: respondents in all five metropolitan areas, regardless of ethnic background; regardless of educational level; regardless of whether they currently, formerly, or never have had a child in a language program. Females were slightly more likely to prefer English than were males.

Since all interviewers were bilingual, respondents had the option of being interviewed in either English or Spanish. Interestingly, those interviewed in Spanish were actually more likely to rank learning English as most important (52.2%) than those interviewed in English (45.1%). This does not mean however that those interviewed in English were more likely to think that learning Spanish should be the top priority. In fact, only 4.9 percent of those interviewed in English ranked learning Spanish as the most important goal. Those interviewed in English were found to be relatively likely to place great importance on *learning other academic subjects like math, history, and science* (44.1 percent of those interviewed in English ranked this as the most important goal).

The relatively higher rankings attached to learning English versus learning Spanish provide strong evidence regarding the educational priorities of Hispanic parents. Another question on the survey addressed the issue not in terms of which is more important, but rather which should come first. The exact wording follows:

In your opinion, should children of Hispanic background, living in the United States, be taught to read and write Spanish before they are taught English, or should they be taught English as soon as possible?

	Percent
Spanish before English	16.7%
English as soon as possible	63.0%
Same time (volunteered)	17.3%
Not sure	3.0%

Once again, the results are clear-cut. Hispanic parents are decisively more likely to prefer that their children be taught English as soon as possible, rather than postponing English instruction while they are being taught Spanish. Although there are variations in intensity, the pattern is broad-based with all subgroupings of the sample in agreement on this issue. For example, among those interviewed in English, 81.4 percent favor teaching English as soon as possible. Among those interviewed in Spanish, a smaller but still significant majority (59.2%) choose this option (only 18.3 percent of those interviewed in Spanish would prefer that children learn Spanish first).

Intensity on this issue varies directly with educational level. The higher the educational level of the respondent, the more likely it is that he or she will prefer that English be taught as soon as possible. A similar pattern prevails with respect to the length of time respondents have lived in the United States. The longer they have been here, the more likely they are to favor English being taught as soon as possible. Cuban-Hispanics are especially adamant on this issue (70 percent want English as soon as possible).

A final question addressed the issue of how language instruction should interface with academic course instruction. The question was:

In general, which of the following comes closest to your opinion?	**Percent**
1. My child should be taught his/her academic courses in Spanish, even if it means he/she will spend less time learning English	12.2%
2. My child should be taught his/her academic courses in English, because he/she will spend more time learning English	81.3%
3. Unsure	6.5%

The overwhelming majority of Hispanic parents want their children's academic courses to be taught in English. This is true among all subcategories of the sample. Groups whose members are relatively most likely to insist on English include Cubans, in general, those in the United States the longest and those with the highest levels of education. Most interestingly, 82 percent of those with a child currently in a school program for children needing help with English would prefer that their children be taught in English.

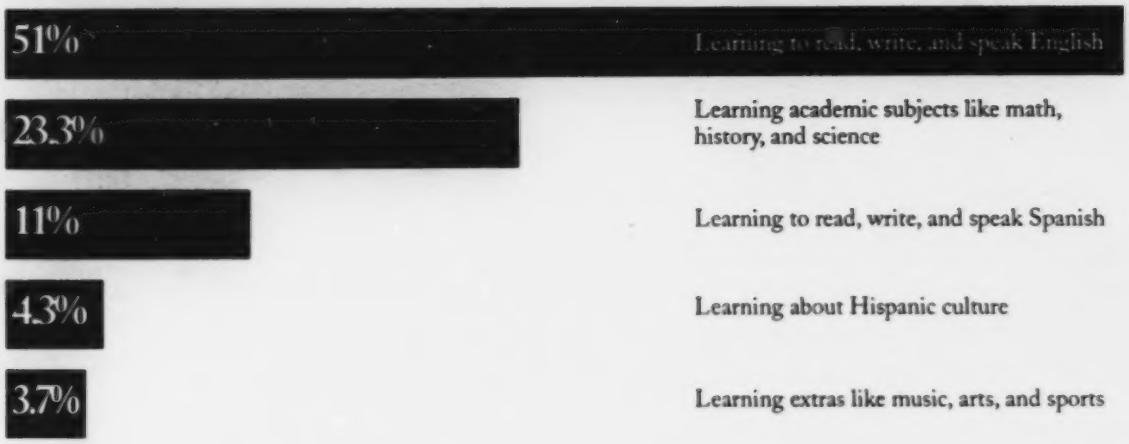
In summary, this survey of Hispanic parents unequivocally shows that Hispanic parents place a higher priority on their children learning English over learning Spanish; that they want their children to learn English first, that is, before they are taught to read, write and speak Spanish. They want to reinforce their children's English skills and their children to be taught their academic courses in English rather than in Spanish. Furthermore, these finding are broad-based—all subgroupings of the sample population share these opinions.

This having been said, the findings of this survey do not in any way suggest that Hispanic parents do not want their children to learn Spanish. It only addresses the perceived relative importance of English versus Spanish, with English being considered the more important life skill for Hispanic children living in the United States.

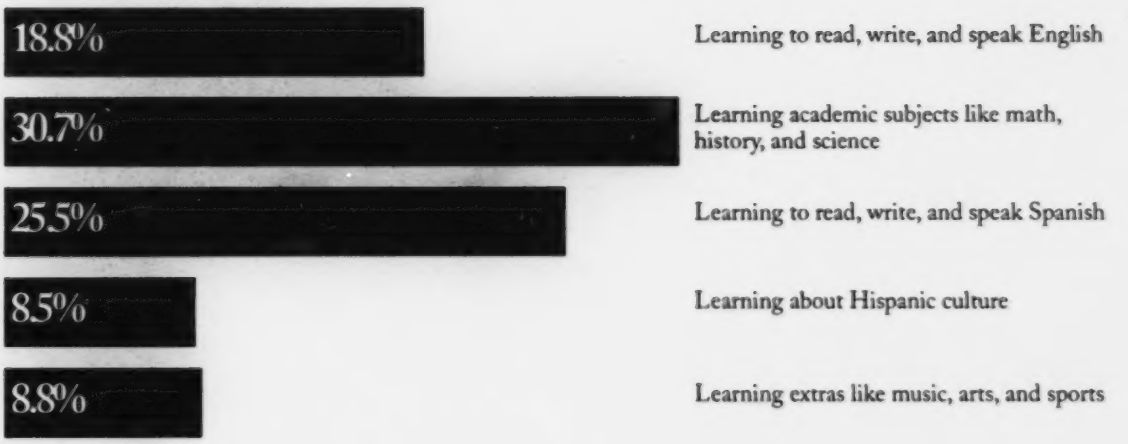
The implications of these findings from a social policy planning viewpoint should be obvious. Hispanic parents may want their children to learn Spanish language skills, and to learn about Spanish culture, but they certainly do not want this to occur at the expense of learning to read, write, and speak English or before they learn these skills. School programs that provide Hispanic children with help in English should be designed with the findings of this study in mind.

What Do Hispanic Parents Think Is Most Important?

Percentage Of Hispanic Parents Ranking Each Goal:
Most Important

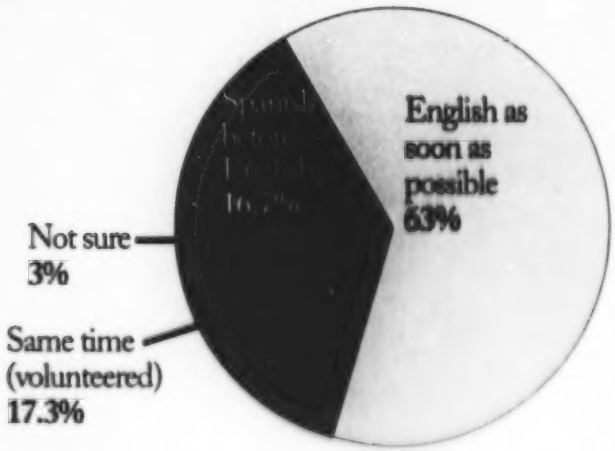


Second Most Important



How Soon Should Hispanic Children Be Taught English?

In your opinion, should children of Hispanic background, living in the United States, be taught to read and write Spanish before they are taught English, or should they be taught English as soon as possible?

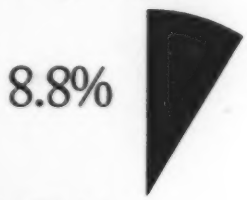


Percentage of parents who think Hispanic children should be taught English as soon as possible:

Interviewed in English

Interviewed in Spanish

Percentage of parents who think Hispanic children should be taught to read and write Spanish before they are taught English:



Interviewed in English

Interviewed in Spanish

Should Academic Courses Be Taught in English or Spanish?

Percentage who prefer English: Percentage who prefer Spanish:

All Hispanic Parents

Interviewed in Spanish

Interviewed in English

Currently with children in program for those who need help in English

Questionnaire

Question 1. **How many school-age (first grade through high school) children do you have, who are living at home?**

One	38.7%	(232)
Two	36.5%	(219)
Three	17.2%	(103)
Four or more	7.7%	(46)
Total responses		(600)

Question 2. **Would you prefer that this interview be conducted in English or Spanish?**

English	17.0%	(102)
Spanish	83.0%	(498)
Total responses		(600)

Question 3. **Is your child (are any of your children) currently in, or ever been in, a program in school for children who need help with English?**

Currently in	8.3%	(50)
In past/not now	7.2%	(43)
Never been in	81.5%	(489)
Don't know	3.0%	(18)
Total responses		(600)

Question 4. **Was your child (were any of your children) ever asked to be in such a program?**

Yes	12.0%	(61)
No	80.1%	(406)
Don't know	7.9%	(40)
Total responses		(507)

Question 5. **In what grade is your oldest child who is currently in such a program?**

First	10.0%	(5)
Second	12.0%	(6)
Third	8.0%	(4)
Fourth	8.0%	(4)
Fifth	10.0%	(5)
Sixth	10.0%	(5)
Seventh	8.0%	(4)
Eighth	4.0%	(2)
Ninth	8.0%	(4)
Tenth	16.0%	(8)
Eleventh	2.0%	(1)
Twelfth	2.0%	(1)
Refused to answer	2.0%	(1)
Total response		(50)

Question 6. **How many years ago was your child last in such a program?**

One	37.2%	(16)
Two	11.6%	(5)
Three	9.3%	(4)
Four	9.3%	(4)
Five	9.3%	(4)
Six or more	18.6%	(8)
Don't know/refused to answer	4.7%	(2)
Total responses		(43)

Question 7. **How many years has your child been in (was your child in) the program?**

One	30.1%	(28)
Two	22.6%	(21)
Three	21.5%	(20)
Four	9.7%	(9)
Five	5.4%	(5)
Six or more	4.3%	(4)
Refused to answer	6.5%	(6)
Total responses		(93)

Question 8. **Was your child in the program a boy or a girl?**

Boy	52.7%	(49)
Girl	47.3%	(44)
Total responses		(93)

Question 9. **Was your child in the program born in the United States?**

Yes	45.2%	(42)
No	54.8%	(51)
Total responses		(93)

Question 10. **At what age did your child come to the United States?**

One	13.7%	(7)
Two	3.9%	(2)
Three	11.8%	(6)
Four	2.0%	(1)
Five	2.0%	(1)
Six	11.8%	(6)
Seven	9.8%	(5)
Eight	5.9%	(3)
Nine	7.8%	(4)
Ten	3.9%	(2)
Eleven	2.0%	(1)
Twelve	3.9%	(2)
Thirteen	7.8%	(4)
Fourteen	5.9%	(3)
Fifteen	5.9%	(3)
Sixteen	2.0%	(1)
Total responses		(51)

Question 11. **When your child first entered the program, did he or she speak English?**

Yes	12.9%	(12)
No	79.6%	(74)
Some	7.5%	(7)
Total responses		(93)

Question 12. **While in the program, how many of your child's lessons were taught in Spanish? Would you say most of the lessons were in Spanish, about half the lessons were in Spanish, only a small part of the lessons were in Spanish, or none of the lessons were in Spanish?**

Most in Spanish	26.9%	(25)
About half	29.0%	(27)
Small part	22.6%	(21)
No Spanish	9.7%	(9)
Don't know/refused	11.8%	(11)
Total responses		(93)

Question 13. **Please rank the following things children might learn in school in order of importance:**

"learning to read, write, and speak English"

(1) Most	51.0%	(306)
(2) Second	18.8%	(113)
(3) Third	7.0 %	(42)
(4) Fourth	6.0%	(36)
(5) Least	9.2%	(55)
Don't know/refused to answer	8.0%	(48)
Total responses		(600)

"learning to read, write, and speak Spanish"

(1) Most	11.0%	(66)
(2) Second	25.5%	(153)
(3) Third	21.8%	(131)
(4) Fourth	16.8%	(101)
(5) Least	15.7%	(94)
Don't know/refused to answer	9.2%	(55)
Total responses		(600)

"learning academic subjects, like math, history, science"

(1) Most	23.3%	(140)
(2) Second	30.7%	(184)
(3) Third	25.0%	(150)
(4) Fourth	10.0%	(60)
(5) Least	3.2%	(19)
Don't know/refused to answer	7.8%	(47)
Total responses		(600)

"learning about Hispanic culture"

(1) Most	4.3%	(26)
(2) Second	8.5%	(51)
(3) Third	19.7%	(118)
(4) Fourth	36.8%	(221)
(5) Least	22.2%	(133)
Don't know/refused to answer	8.5%	(51)
Total responses		(600)

"learning extras like music, art, and sports"

(1) Most	3.7%	(22)
(2) Second	8.8%	(53)
(3) Third	18.5%	(111)
(4) Fourth	21.2%	(127)
(5) Least	39.8%	(239)
Don't know/refused to answer	8.0%	(48)
Total responses		(600)

Question 14. **In your opinion, should children of Hispanic background, living in the United States, be taught to read and write Spanish before they are taught English, or should they be taught English as soon as possible?**

Spanish before Englsh	16.7%	(100)
English soon/possible	63.0%	(378)
Same time	17.3%	(104)
Don't know/refused to answer	3.0%	(18)
Total responses		(600)

Question 15. **In general, which of the following comes closest to your opinion?**
1. My child should be taught his/her academic courses in Spanish, even if it means he/she will spend less time learning English
2. My child should be taught his/her academic courses in English, because he/she will spend more time learning English

Spanish	12.2%	(73)
English	81.3%	(488)
Don't know/refused to answer	6.5%	(39)
Total responses		(600)

Question 16. **How many years of formal education have you had?**

Some grade school	10.3%	(62)
Finish grade school	12.5%	(75)
Some high school	22.8%	(137)
Finish high school	21.8%	(131)
Commerical/tech	3.5%	(21)
Some college	11.8%	(71)
Finished college	12.5%	(75)
Graduate studies	3.0%	(18)
No school	1.0%	(6)
Refused to answer	0.7%	(4)
Total responses		(600)

Question 17. **What is your age?**

18-25	3.5%	(21)
26-40	57.5%	(345)
41-54	31.5%	(189)
55-64	4.2%	(25)
65 or older	1.3%	(8)
Refused to answer	2.0%	(12)
Total responses		(600)

Question 18. **What is your origin of descent?**

United States	11.0%	(66)
Mexico	47.8%	(287)
Cuba	8.3%	(50)
Puerto Rico	6.8%	(41)
Dominican Republic	4.2%	(25)
Spain	0.8%	(5)
Other Central America	10.5%	(63)
South America	9.3%	(56)
Other	0.3%	(2)
Refused to answer	0.8%	(5)
Total responses		(600)

Question 19. **How many years have you lived in the United States?**

10 years or less	24.2%	(145)
11-20 years	31.3%	(188)
More than 20	22.2%	(133)
All my life	20.5%	(123)
Refused to answer	1.8%	(11)
Total responses		(600)

Question 20. **Gender:**

Male	31.7%	(190)
Female	68.3%	(410)
Total responses		(600)

Question 21. **How well did respondent speak English? (Interviewers' evaluation of language skills)**

Very well	27.2%	(163)
Well	20.7%	(124)
Not well	35.5%	(213)
Not at all	16.7%	(100)
Total responses		(600)

Question 22. **Market**

Los Angeles	(120)
Miami	(120)
New York	(120)
San Antonio	(120)
Houston	(120)
Total responses	(600)